

ARCTIC CO-OPS

Some observations...

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The first Eskimo Co-operative Conference was held at Frobisher Bay from March 12-18. Delegates attended from 17 existing co-operatives.

From the Western Arctic (Inuvik and Aklavik), the Central Arctic (Cambridge Bay and Coppermine), from the extreme north (Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord), from the west side of Hudson's Bay, from Baffin Island, from Labrador and Quebec, delegates converged on Frobisher Bay. Almost all the Eskimo groupings in the north were represented. Attending were presidents of co-operatives and selected members — all delegates to represent officially and to speak on behalf of their local communities. Delegates were conscious of this right and took full advantage of it. This gave the Conference a special authenticity and representativeness and delegates concerned themselves with social and economic problems in their widest connotation rather than with only purely monetary sense.

Everyone present became consciously aware and sharply reminded of the diversity and unity which exists in the Eskimo population.

Diversity stems from many factors. The Canadian north is a country of enormous size, vast

distance, and sparse population. Means of communication, even today in some regions, are still too rudimentary (dog teams, canoes, etc.) to form a really efficient transportation pattern, or too costly (snowmobile, plane) for regular and frequent use. Then too, there is a great variation in the degree of contact with "white" influence. A number of settlements have been open to commerce for a long time and have had school services for a very considerable period, while other settlements remain isolated, for the most part, until quite recently with the people following the "old way" of life. Again, there is the diversity which springs from differences in dialects, religion and local customs. But one is also aware that this diversity exists against a back-ground of unity.

Forces molding unity among the Eskimos are stronger than those which bring about diversity. Born of a common race (although mixed racially in certain places), having the same aspirations towards a form of progress still possibly ill-defined, endeavouring to achieve a more stable mode of living and a more widespread and continuing sense of well-being, they are now seeking to emancipate themselves economically from those forces and institutions, whose shepherding hand has helped mold their patterns of living over the many years. Now there is a growing desire to direct their own affairs and take their own interests in hand. Several times, strong and clear, and sparked by this growing spirit of independence, one heard during the Conference this question: "Who is the leader of this Co-op?" "Is it a white man or an Eskimo?"

Parenthetically, one might say that a conference such as the one held at Frobisher Bay constitutes a further assault on the linguistic barriers which tend to separate rather than unify. Like other opportunities for interdialectal contact, such as

the schools, the hospitals, the radio and the press — this Conference and others like it have a cumulative effect for good in this direction.

The Conference itself began on Tuesday morning at 8.30. The plane from the west did not arrive until 4.00 a.m. of the day of the Conference opening — not a few of the delegates had only time for snatches of sleep before the sessions commenced. Despite this, the work of the Conference began on time in great earnest and thus set a working pace which did not slacken in the days following. Mr. Snowden, Chief the Industrial Division, Department of Northern Affairs, presided over the first session, assisted by Mr. Simoni, President of the Housing Co-operative of Frobisher Bay. Mr. Simoni acquitted himself so well that he was chosen to represent the Arctic Co-ops at the general meeting of provincial co-operatives which was planned for April.

Each delegate at first gave a brief outline of the history of his co-operative, indicating the measure of success achieved and what its future plans were. He then answered questions put to him by other delegates concerning the fishery, hunting, sewing, carving and print-making. It was very interesting to note the variety of activities engaged in by the different co-operatives. One co-operative specialized in carving (ivory, soapstone, etc.); others in housing and still others in fishing. A close form of fruitful collaboration should emerge as a result of proper organization of such a variety of activities and especially among those with like interests and purposes. When this is realized, a more rational approach to the problem of proper utilization of the multiple Arctic resources, which up until now had hardly been exploited, can be brought into play. One great good from all of this would be giving the lie to those who consider the mines to be the only asset worthy

of development in the north. The attendant misery consequent upon working underground, temporary employment, and transient prosperity are often small rewards for work in the mines when one considers the break with the best of their Eskimo traditions, the loss of liberty and independence which all too often are the human price which must be paid — and all of this in the interest of "outside" share-holders.

The success of the Eskimo co-operatives is undeniable. The first co-operative was established at George River, April 14, 1959, and in the same year, co-operatives were founded at Port Burwell and Cape Dorset. In 1961, four new co-operatives were incorporated, and in 1961, five others, making a total of 17 co-operatives in all by March 1963. A glance at overall growth figures will give some idea of their vitality: \$200,000.00 in 1961; almost \$500,000.00 in 1962. How does one account for this success especially when one considers the difficulties which plagued our co-operatives at the outset?

Osuitok, the delegate from Cape Dorset Co-operative, had this to say: « Formerly at Cape Dorset, during the winter, because of lack of funds, it was very difficult to provide our selves with sufficient ammunition and we often went hungry — without ammunition there was no hunting, no meat and nothing to trade for wood needed to build our kayaks. Now this does not happen anymore; we are no longer short of cartridges nor wood and we are able to buy food and other supplies at the store because we now have money. »

Paulusi from Povungnetuk had much the same thing to report. At Port Burwell and George River, the co-operatives had proved their value to the Eskimo. At Frobisher Bay the Housing Co-operative made it possible for members to build comfortable homes adapted to their needs.

Through the co-operative movement the Eskimo has been able to raise his standard of living — this is a new hope — this is mutual assistance without the degrading and demoralizing ill effects of a government handout. This healthy economic development among the Eskimo is a far, far cry from the deadening system of welfare benefits, however worthy a man's energy and initiative and his desire to work. As Rolland Cluny says, « the recipient of a dole is humiliated and thereby his misfortune is compounded. »

The co-operative movement gives the Eskimo an opportunity for the full development of his many and varied strong points. Given the proper conditions in which to work (even if these may be something less than ideal when one considers "white" standards) the Eskimo, through his co-operatives, has proven himself competent in many fields. Of note are the results obtained at Cape Dorset and Povungnetuk where sculpture and print-making has been so successfully carried on. Of course, the co-operative does not make the artist: but it does give him a chance and it encourages him to actualize his talent abilities. Similarly, a co-operative does not make a fisherman out of an Eskimo. But at Fort Chimo, Frobisher Bay, George River and Port Burwell, Eskimo fishermen, through their co-operatives, were encouraged and modern equipment. New markets, too, were found were able to continue fishing using the most for their catches which previously were destined only for uneconomical local consumption.

The producers co-operative in many ways is fast becoming a source of income for the Eskimo family. Ideally suited to their way of life, this kind of co-operative enables the man of the family to follow traditional occupations such as hunting and at the same time provides an opportunity for the woman of the family to make over into

a marketable product some of the by-products of the hunt. An example of this is the processing of seal skins. The Eskimo woman, long respected as a skilled seamstress, manufactures from the seal skin many attractive and useful articles for which a ready market exists in the south. Nor is the processing of seal skins the only example of local industry and manufacture. There are many others. Ivory for instance, in bulk sells at \$1.00 per pound: this ivory made into a marketable item often fetches returns several times that amount.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of co-operatives in the natural manner in which they complement the patterns of social organization and social outlook commonly found among the Eskimo. It seems therefore that the co-operatives have much to contribute towards re-adapting the Eskimo economy to meet the needs of present day northern living.

Notwithstanding how ideally the co-operative fits into the Eskimo way of life, it seems hardly necessary to state that for some time to come the necessary initial capital will have to be provided from the "outside". This is also true of training programs in managerial know-how. The Federal Government, aware of the socio-economic values of this movement among its northern peoples, has begun to arrange for this kind of assistance. In so doing, the Government has given the movement an added impetus and a form of support which will enable the co-operatives to proceed and develop along sound, economic and educational lines.

Equally remarkable at the Conference was the fact that despite the large number of "whites" in assistance, there was at no time any attempt made by any of them to dominate the Conference. This approach nurtured an attitude of mutual respect and confidence and provided the proper

setting and the right relationship for a full discussion and treatment of those matters which the delegates felt should be dealt with.

One final remark in conclusion. As the Minister of Northern Affairs underlined in his commentary on the work of the Conference, thanks to the good effects of a movement such as the co-operatives, the Eskimos will become more and more in a position to manage their own affairs and through this movement progress will be realized in every dimension of living including the human, the social and the economic.

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Also in conclusion, the wish could be formulated that the schools in the north play an increasing role in educating in a more practical way those pupils who will be returning to the traditional modes of living. In such a school program the Eskimo language should have a prominent place and such practical subjects as working with seal skins, and the like, should be included. In taking more into consideration the socio-economic realities of northern living, the northern schools would be more geared to training a type of person who would look with more pride upon the past and who would look forward with more confidence towards the future.

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